

Notes on the Theatrical Offer in Contemporary Romania

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Abstract: This paper is a note on the theatrical offer in Romania and it seeks to lay emphasis on some of the elements that are essential to the understanding of theatrical marketing in this geographic area. The focus is on the understanding and the definition of the theatrical product and on repertory construction. Furthermore, the article includes a series of economic analyses conducted in order to complete the theoretical examination, as well as case studies material to our research topic.

Keywords: arts marketing, offer and demand, theatre repertory, Romanian Theatre, cultural policy

What is the theatrical product now?

The correct definition of the offered cultural product relates directly to the vision and to the strategy of the institution that produces it. The entire matter of product definition may seem at first a false problem, but we believe that many problems of marketing implementation stem from this apparently simple aspect. The difficulties (or alleged difficulties) attached to the definition of the product result from the specificity of arts. The classification – discussed at large – in terms of the criterion of “high art” and “popular art” does not seem to be “in vogue” any longer. At a closer look, we can see that there is no homogeneity in relation to the qualitative criteria that turn a product into a “good” or a “bad” one – and this is only natural. For this reason, the classification in quality groups of the theatrical products becomes a subjective, random matter and, in particular, it cannot become a multipliable standard methodology. This thorny issue is on the shoulders of those in

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charge of the repertory policy, the human resources policy – which also means the selection of the collaborators, of guests, etc. The art director, i.e. the one who, by the nature of his/her activity, is in charge or should be in charge of the quality of the performances and of the theatre's products, must always be alert and always monitor the gradual development of the cultural-theatrical environment and of the institution's audience, with help from the ancillary departments.

Theatrical products may, however, be classified and defined by other characteristic, not necessarily in line with a rigid qualitative grid, but instead with the relation between the "quality" of the products and the "quality of reception". For this reason, the borders within which the theatrical products is found should be identified from the very beginning, if not even from the stage of drafting of the management project. An answer to the question "what is our product?" is required and, from then on, various working scenarios can be built. If the answer is "the stage play", the marketing operations shall orbit the related play. If, for example, the answer is "the repertory", the marketing operations are adjusted toward the assistance of this product. The very precise understanding of the offer is essential for the establishment of the marketing line that the institution will later follow. The interesting aspect is that one answer does not exclude the other, which, in the end, will lead to an entire marketing system that will integrate all the lines and the products undertaken as such.

In Romania, theatres "sell" plays, repertories and festivals. Of course, some institutions try to diversify the cultural offer and they seek to extend the idea of cultural-theatrical product. We are thinking here, first of all, about theatres that, apart from the so-called "traditional products", are offering to the audience creative workshops, thematic events, etc. and which augment their cultural offer by other methods than the production of plays as such. Most of the times, offers of this kind come from the educational area, either as programs for the young or as informative-educational programs for adults. Unsurprisingly, state institutions that have managed to propose such a program are in the sector of theatre for children and adolescents. We mention here the initiatives of Ariel Theatre of Tirgu-Mureș, Gong Theatre of Sibiu and Puck Theatre of Cluj-Napoca. In the independent sphere, the rethinking of the cultural offer is considerably more prevalent, since most of the times the independents' "repertory" is much more diverse in terms of the presented cultural products. The concerns with the diversification of the products, so

frequent in the independent environments, is closely linked with the competitive dimension of the Romanian cultural market. Another explanation relates to the “alternative” that the independents are trying to offer to the audience – which should ensure their steadier position on the cultural market. In his book *Surplus de oameni, surplus de idei*, Theodor Cristian Popescu clarifies the meaning of this alternative in Romania, but he stresses the ambiguity of the term and its different connotations, depending on the specific cultural environments.

In other words, alternative theatre is established in opposition to another type, without de-territorializing the latter; it is manifest in other areas; it generates its own separate festivals, it searches for a different language ...²

The author notes that, in countries such as Poland and Hungary, where independent theatre has been present since communism, the label “alternative” appears in close relation to the movement of independent theatre, but this is not yet valid across the whole former Eastern bloc.

But back to the definition of cultural products, we focus on Pierre Bourdieu’s approach that identifies in the book *The Market of Symbolic Goods* two types of opposing fields of production: the field of restricted production “as a system producing cultural goods (and the instruments for appropriating these goods) objectively destined (at least on the short term) for a public of producers that produce for producers” and the field of large scale production “specifically organized with a view to the production of symbolic goods destined for non-producers (“the public at large”) who may come from the non-intellectual fractions of the dominant class (“the cultivated public”) or from the other social classes.”³ The differences between the two are the following:

In contrast to the field of large-scale cultural production, which submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market, the field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors.⁴

2. Theodor Cristian Popescu, *Surplus de oameni, surplus de idei* [Too Many People, Too Many Ideas] (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2012), 9.

3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Economia bunurilor simbolice* [The Market of Symbolic Goods] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1987), 37.

4. Ibid.

Bourdieu's suggestion is also valid in the case of the Romanian field. The major difference is that, many times, producers do not have a strategy developed prior to the launching of the product, but the polarization between "large-scale production" and the "field of restricted production" is operated after the reactions of the market. And this is not always the case. Many state theatres in small localities rely on "large-scale production" made mostly of comedies, the staging of novels/stories that are included in the school-recommended literature or plays for children. All the aforementioned products share an important aspect, i.e. "box-office success", by having the target-audience come see the plays, with the help of the artist manager. In other words, pupils and kindergarten children are brought to see the performances by their school teachers, and the activity is perceived as a school, mandatory one rather than a voluntary one.

The finding of the cultural product's correct destination relates to marketing. One should not operate on the "art is good for you" principle, but instead on the "art is good" principle, in a way that should allow the cultural product to earn meaning in the potential spectator's lifestyle component⁵. The above-mentioned practice does not support such a perception, not at all. Most of the times, with these methods, young people miss the opportunity of a true meeting with theatre or with the theatrical product, precisely because of the identification of the artistic act with the school act. In such situations, the product offered by the theatre is the repertory as such rather than the play in itself. We will exemplify (table 1) by using the repertory of the "Elvira Godeanu" Theatre of Târgu Jiu, in the 2010-2011 season.

Table 1: Repertory of Elvira Godeanu Theatre, Târgu Jiu, 2011

	Play
Premiere	Pleasure Train - adaptation after I.L. Caragiale
	Seventh Commandment by Dario Fo
	Storia de Tanti (comedy) by Achille Roselletti
	Nasta – adaptation after Ms. Nastasia (G.M. Zamfirescu)
	Comedy by Ray Cooney
Plays for children-Premiere	Mr. Goe
	Păcală

5. Joanne Scheff Bernstein, *Arts marketing insights: the dynamics of building and retaining performing arts audiences* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2007), 27.

	Play
Reruns	Me and my Girl – director Achille Roselletti
	Run for Your Wife - director Cristian Ioan
	Titanic Waltz by Tudor Muşatescu
	Leonce and Lena - director Horațiu Ioan Apan
Plays to be performed on request	The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War by Matei Visniec
	The Hatchet by Mihail Sadoveanu
	Lost Letter by I.L. Caragiale

Source: elviragodeanu.wordpress.com

The offer of the Târgu Jiu theatre is oriented toward comedies, canonical writers and books that are read in school. The diversity of the titles is very weak, which limits the potential audience because of the repetitiveness of the offered genre of plays. Moreover, the cultural offer is made entirely of play performances and there is no other kind of cultural project that could complement the theatre programme. The principles on which the repertory relies cover the “classical taste” for theatre, but they miss the meeting with an audience that may also appreciate other types of theatrical suggestions. Of course, more often than not, the audience cannot foresee its own need of theatrical consumption, but, as mentioned in numerous circumstances, theatrical need is most of the times built gradually by the offer existing on the market. Or, it is precisely this construction of need that develops the potential audience and which, on the long term, could reach a degree of sophistication. Repertory structures like the one described above are typical of the institutions that rely on a preservation of the existing audience rather than on their development.

Many Romanian theatrical institutions continue to choose such conservative repertory fabrics, which led us to this track of research regarding a re-defining of theatrical products and their addressability. Since we are limited by the length of this article, we will not go further into details and other examples, but such examples to exist in Romania, particularly small theatres outside Bucharest. The amendment of the repertory policy is not simple, because, most often, the audience, already accustomed with another type of performance, will be at least skeptical when it comes to changes. For this reason, a reassessment of the “products” should anticipate such problems and offer reliable solutions that are shaped both on the audience’s specificity and on the research meant for the development of new audiences.

The repertory, analyzed from the viewpoint of marketing, is no more than the "line" of products of a company or, in other words, the company portfolio. An art organization will hardly ever be able to support or propose to the audience a single product; therefore, a set of products is needed; they will attend both to the purposes and objectives and to the needs and desires of the target-audience. Inevitably, we come to the distribution of the existing (constantly limited and exhaustible) resources depending on the multiple internal or external factors, such as the audience's demand, the life cycle of the existing plays, etc.

The product life cycle relates to the stages of development of the product on the specific market or on the market on which it was launched. Therefore, the stages are:

1. Product launch on the market
2. Growth – the market share increases and profit ensues
3. Maturity – the market share is large and it generates maximum earnings
4. Saturation – the market share decreases, but production is still profitable
5. Decline – the share drops drastically and the product is removed from the market or changed/updated

Most products, even those meant for wide consumption or those extremely sophisticated, go through this life cycle, despite the fact that their duration varies considerably. For example, bread has been in the stage of maturity for hundreds of years and whether and when the decline stage will begin are not known aspects. On the other hand, a computer, for well-known reasons, does not have a life cycle longer than several years. The marketer's responsibility is to establish the product's life expectancy and to find solutions for the extension of its presence on the market, preferably in the maturity stage. Therefore, marketing actions shall concern all the component of the marketing mix and, ultimately, will lead to a set of decisions undertaken by the company management. The most frequent model of portfolio management is the Boston Consulting Group Matrix, which classifies an organization's products based on the market share and on the market growth rate. We illustrate the matrix below:

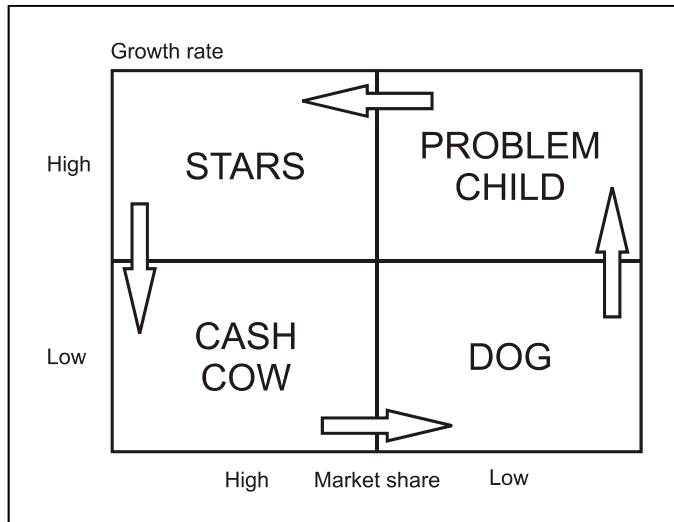


Fig. 1: Boston Consulting Group Matrix

“Stars” are the products with a high market share on a market with a high growth rate, i.e. the products that ensure company profit and visibility. The “cash cow” is the product that stays on the market and that yield profit, but there are small chances of development because the market is decreasing. “The problem child” is the product that does not sell very well, but its market is expanding. Owing to its high potential, the “problem child” should be converted to a “star” by marketing and management measures. “Dogs” are the products with a low market share on a declining market. These products use up the company resources and, most of the times, they should be reevaluated. The Boston Consulting Group is summing up the matrix by the famous saying: “polish the star, milk the cow, educate the problem child and shoot the dog”⁶.

The aforementioned template applies very well to the repertory structure of state theatres, but it is equally valid in the case of independent initiatives. The point of reference should not be unique and it should not consider exclusively the earnings, but criteria based on the objectives and purposes expressed by each theatre may be formulated. Nevertheless, one should not exclude the option of an analysis on economic ground, because such a classification of the plays may lead to a sound distribution of resources.

6. Jim Blythe, *Esențialul în marketing* [Essentials of Marketing] (Bucharest: Rentrop & Straton, 2005), 28.

In other words, we need “stars” to support the “dog” that we cannot abandon because of extra-financial reasons; or the presence of the “dog” in the repertory generates artistic or educational added value and it should be kept within the most efficient parameters. The explanation for the keeping of a “dog” product in a theatre’s repertory should pertain to the sphere of audience construction and, thus, be justified by the organic growth of theatrical demand in a specific geographic space.

Some products respond to needs, while other products create needs. In art, products that cover both of the marketing directions are needed; subsequently, repertory theatre (most of the times subsidized by the state) should cover both types of product constructions, undertaking the effects/outcomes generated on the market. We say this because, depending on the selected repertory policy, a performing arts institution shall be found in a particular point on the spectators’ perceptual map.

In the case of the independent theatre, the definition of the product does not seem to be an equally intricate and urgent matter. For all intents and purposes, the reason is easily recognizable. The need to resist on the market prompts independent associations to update their products and to diversify substantially their cultural offer or, conversely, to identify a specific and well-defined target-segment and to create plays/cultural products exclusively for that group. The independent organizations’ marketing process is considerably clearer, even if frequently intuitive, and it manages to establish the “alternative” mentioned above.

For example, the Create.Act.Enjoy association of Cluj-Napoca created two product lines, i.e. a series for young people and adults and, separately, the production of stage plays and dance-theatre. The former focuses, of course, on the generation of the organization’s income and financial support, while the latter operates as an independent theatre initiative and it is financed from the income generated by the course offer. This model, whereby an association is able to generate its own income, is preferable, because this way the organization can support itself in the periods when locally, nationally or internationally awarded non-refundable financing is unavailable. The same principle applies to the operation of theatre-café. Two known examples are Bucharest’s Godot Café and Iași’s Teatru Fix. With independent theatre, the definition and clarification of product specificity become a mandatory activity, which, in the end, will generate the distinctive nature of each individual organization.

Another example, again from Cluj-Napoca, is the association Reactor de Creație și Experiment. Unlike the above models, the Reactor association did not develop a line of products able to generate substantial income that could support the current activity, beyond the non-refundable sources. We do note, however, the Mini-Reactor children’s programme that has considerable success and, unlike other projects of the group, has been constantly present in their offer. Ever since 2014, Reactor has been trying to create their own repertory and to build a permanent programme in their space. To ensure success in this sense, the initiators developed the so-called “platforms”, i.e. thematic umbrellas that are made of various cultural products/proposals. Table 2 emphasizes the components of Reactor’s programmes and their selected directions. The information is obtained from the official website of the association.

Table 2: The cultural offer of Reactor de Creație și Experiment, Cluj-Napoca, 2014

Platform name	Description
Professional REACTOR	“Here we organize and host workshops in various artistic fields. They seek to develop new skills and to allow the pleasant and productive use of spare time.”
Social REACTOR social	“This platform is steered by director Cristian Ban, to produce plays, projects and workshops of a social nature. The platform was launched in 2014 with the SubReflector project.”
Sound REACTOR	“We organize under this platform concerts performed by artists in very different fields, from folk music to experimental jazz. Thus, we try to uncover the music architecture of Cluj, we try to recover the contact with its creators and to enable the meeting between them and their listeners.”
HappeningREACTOR	“This platform is dedicated to Plastic Arts, Poetry and Film, and here we organize events such as exhibitions, vernissages, installations, film screenings, poetry reading, visual experiments. An important contributor and supporter of this platform is the photographer and professor Dorel Găină. The platform was launched in the 21 March “Seek a Reaction?” marathon, by the visual experiment Behind the canvas, a concept by graffer KeroZen, accompanied by Electroclown”
#TEENSPIRIT	It includes three performances: <i>Nu cred că o să îmi treacă vreodată</i> [I’ll never get over it], <i>Disparația</i> [The Disappearance], <i>În viitorul apropiat</i> [In the near future]

Platform name	Description
REACTOR	<p>“This is the main platform of Reactor de creație și experiment, which offers to the audience independent theatre performances.</p> <p>Apart from our own productions, REACTOR also becomes co-producers in the creation of projects proposed by various artists. The first collaboration of this kind was with the Reciproca Association, for the plays <i>Poker</i> and <i>9 din 10 [9 out of 10]</i>.</p> <p>With the same REACTOR platform, we seek to stage periodically other independent performances from Cluj, from the country or from abroad, in order to encourage the independent artists’ cooperation and communication.”</p>

Source: www.reactor-cluj.com/2015

Each platform includes specific individual platforms. Therefore, apart from the “main” platform, which focuses on the production and co-production of plays, other directions complement the program and draw an audience as diversified as possible. At the same time, the “secondary” offer adds to the construction and loyalty-building of the audience for the main platforms.

In the independent field, the definition of the offered products is (to some extent) a solved matter, which, at present, keeps frequently afloat the non-governmental organizations. The fact that each independent organization is much more careful about the products they release on the market and cannot make many mistakes delivers specificity and a particular niche of action to each group.

“Success” indicators

The test that any repertory proposal needs to pass is the confrontation with the audience institution and the results it generates by the sale of tickets and the theatre occupation rate. We submit below a presentation of the data obtained from the analysis and synthesis of information about the National Theatre of Bucharest, information from the Annual Activity Report for the 2013/2014 seasons. Again, like with the Târgu-Jiu “Elvira Godeanu” Theatre, classic titles and comedies are the most appreciated and most seen

plays. Of course, their share in the repertory structure is wider. When we analyze carefully the NTB's proposal, we can see that the portfolio theory and the Boston Consulting Group matrix do apply to some extent. The projects of the 9G Program, which support young artists, are at the end of the queue in terms of number of spectators and earnings. Of course, 9G plays are not stages in the Grand Hall of the theatre and, subsequently, the theatre occupation rate would help us complete the information below, but, unfortunately, we do not have data on this rate for each individual performance. Nevertheless, we believe that the information below (table 3) is sufficient for an indication of the main coordinates applied by the first stage of the country for the definition of the nation-wide trend.

Table 3: Premieres of the National Theatre of Bucharest, 2013

No.	Name of the play	Realized estimate	Receipts from tickets	No. of performances	No. of spectators	Receipt/performance	No. of performances required for amortization
1	The Man who Saw Death	163215	69400	20	1926	3470	47.04
2	Little Hell	212428	145590	26	4310	5600	37.94
3	The Inspector General	418298	261660	12	4803	21805	19.18
4	Fool for Love	218371	36180	15	1054	2412	90.54
5	Rumors	238998	79770	5	1482	15954	14.98

Several notes on the calculations of table 3. The data in the columns *Realized estimate*, *Receipts from tickets*, *Number of performances* and *Number of spectators* were borrowed from the (aforementioned) Annual Activity Report, and the columns *Receipt/performance* and *Number of performances required for amortization* were calculated based on this information. We need to mention that, in the column *Realized estimate*, we do not know the components of the costs per category, therefore we cannot state with accuracy whether, for example, the actors' salaries (fixed costs for the institution) were considered.

Table 4: Plays reprised in the 2013-2014 season, National Theatre, Bucharest

No.	Project name	Receipt from tickets	No. of performances	No. of spectators	Receipt/ performance
1	The Navel	887360	23	19389	38581
2	The Dinner Game	865970	20	15777	43299
3	The Idol and Ion Anapoda	349446	15	10016	23296
4	The Visit	193740	8	4315	24218
5	Molto, Gran' Impressione	76380	12	3852	6365
6	The Letter	129780	6	2981	21630
7	Five Women in Transition	96976	26	2614	3730
8	All My Sons	98986	7	2527	14141
9	The Cherry Orchard	81990	5	2216	16398
10	Scourge	107400	11	2136	9764
11	It's Still Alright	73660	22	2006	3348
12	Sânziana and Pepelea	31592	3	1776	10531
13	Master Leonida Facing the Reactionaries	94320	17	1718	5548
14	Lottery Tickets	57008	17	1579	3353
15	Sentimental Tectonics	45100	10	1298	4510
16	The Girl from the Rainbow	36464	20	1108	1823
17	TaRa TaTam	37494	8	1035	4687
18	Two x Two	35384	13	977	2722
19	Don Quixote	35750	2	803	17875
20	Saturday, Sunday, Monday	28776	9	795	3197
21	Cat Ladder	23264	18	709	1292
22	The Duel	19392	8	537	2424
23	The Boy in the Last Row	14642	5	452	2928
24	Coming Clean	2784	2	87	1392
	Total	3423658	287	80703	267052

Overall, for the year 2013, 365 performances are proposed, of which 287 performances are reprised and 78 performances of the plays produced in 2013. The receipts-to-investment ratio is 7-8%, and the number of spectators present to the related events is 94,279.

Conclusions

In this article, we sought to obtain a picture as relevant as possible in relation to the theatrical offer in contemporary Romania, as well as to identify a trend of repertory structures, if there is any. Of course, the repertory analysis is also considering other repertories than those described here for exemplification. We tried to provide examples from all the types of institutions present on the market, i.e. municipal theatres ("Elvira Godeanu" Theatre, Târgu Jiu), national theatres ("I.L. Caragiale" National Theatre of Bucharest), independent theatres (Reactor de Creație și Experiment, Cluj-Napoca), to show their particularities, if any.

However, beyond the picture shown by the case studies, an important aspect to be researched in greater detail is the definition of the theatrical product and the impact that such a reconsideration would have on the Romanian theatrical sector. The rethinking of the theatrical product/service (in the sense offered by cultural marketing) would be a first step taken for the revival of theatrical offers, but also the rebranding of Romanian theatres. Certainly, the study and the understanding of the theatrical offer are essential, but there should also be a counterpart, i.e. the research and understanding of the demand present in the market. Of course, we are in the field of arts and marketing continues to be product-oriented rather than customer-oriented, but the correlation of the demand with the offer or at least the outlining of the limits within which the two define each other should be established.

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